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AUTHOR Knott, Christine A.
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ABSTRACT

This personal narrative recounts the experiences of a group of adult learners six months after they completed a graduate diploma in adult education. They speak of their discovery that empowerment, in terms of enabling and energizing, involved a seeming contradictory sense of vulnerability in terms of "the paradox of empowerment." The narrative begins by providing a brief overview of the postgraduate diploma course in adult and community education offered at the West Sussex Institute of Higher Education (England). Provided next are reflections on the group's experiences in the program in terms of Malcolm Knowles' assumptions about andragogy. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which their own experiences related to Knowles' ideas concerning (1) the self-directedness of adult learning, (2) the importance of adult learners' own experiences as a rich resource for learning, (3) the strong link between adults' readiness to learn and the developmental tasks required for the performance of social roles, and (4) the problem-centered orientation of adult learning, with the importance of immediacy of application. Also discussed are key elements of success (a negotiated/partnership curriculum, recognition of the process of learning, creation of a fruitful learning climate, appropriate use of experiential learning, and mutual learning of tutor and student) and key elements of dissatisfaction (assessment and tutor performance). (MN)

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THE PARADOX OF EMPOVERMENT

Christine A. Knott

West Sussex Institute of Higher Education

The Dome, Upper Bognor Road

Bognor Regis, West Sussex, PO21 1HR. England

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THE PARADOX OF EMPOWERMENT

INTRODUCTION

> "As we stand here, remember those who have enlarged the horizons of your mind and pray for all who teach"
>
> found in the Chapel of St. Edmund Rich,
> Salisbury Cathedral, England.

As we sit here I wonder whom we will remember? Who has been responsible for enlarging our minds?

What follows is set principally within the experience of a group of adult learners six months after the completion of a graduate diploma programme in adult education. We found that the process of enlargement is a mutual one between teacher and student, student and student and student and teacher so all are learning from each other. The first person plural is accordingly used in this paper to reflect that mutual experience.

A further major discovery of our group was that empowerment, in terms of enabling and energising, involved for us the seemingly absurd or contradictory experience of vulnerability. In other words to be empowered involves the experience of powerlessness, of feeling defenceless and exposed to pain. Hence the title of this paper.

THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

In 1984 a post-graduate diploma programme in adult and community education was established at West Sussex Institute of Higher Education (W.S.I.H.E.), a voluntary college in the maintained sector of higher education. This is a two-year part-time course, validated by Southampton University. The stated aims of the course are to further the personal and professional development of the participants. The programme consists of independent certificates, four of which have to be completed to be awarded the diploma.

The Year Book of Adult Continuing Education 1986-87 (NIACE 1986) records that of the fifty universities in Great Brtitain only fourteen offer post-graduate programmes in adult education. To date we do not know of another higher education establishment in the manintained sector offering such a programme. Stephen Brookfield (1985) records that the relatively small scale of postgraduate adult education is a major difference between this country and the United States. Additionally, in the same paper Brookfield (1985) refers to the difference in the intellectual history of adult education. In the United States this is viewed as an enhancement to the realization of individualism, whereas in Britain there is less consensus on what comprises any central tradition. He says:

> "A very real debate rages in British adult education between those who view adult education in terms of individual cultural enhancement and those who set adult education within the context of social and political movement."
>
> Stephen Brookfield (1985:61)

The diploma programme at W.S.I.H.E., the experience of which is the focus of this paper, initially emphasises the personal development of participants. The first two certificates are in Adult Psychology and the Principles and Practice of Adult Education. It is only in the second year of the course that the individualistic approach is extended to include social and political contexts. Using Brookfield's (1985) more detailed analysis it is clear that the diploma programme overall would be more easily recognised in the United States than in Great Britain in terms of low emphasis on historicity, a self-directing philosophical orientation, broad competencies required of professionals, a concept of adult education that is student-centred and paradigms of research concerned with programme development and evaluation. A caveat on this analysis must be added, however, to emphasise the relativity rather than the polarity of the above statement.

THE EDUCATIONAL RATIONALE

Certainly the starting point for the course was andragogy, principally of Malcolm Knowles (1975, 1978 and 1980). This approach to teaching and learning has received considerable critical appraisal in recent years in Great Britain and elsewhere. Anne Hartree (1984), for example, in her critique of Knowles, concludes that his claim that andragogy provides a unified theory of adult learning is optimistic. Similarly, Mark Tennant (1986) encourages us to abandon some of the myths about adult learning which Knowles supports, namely;

> ".....the myth that our need for self-direction is rooted in our constitutional make-up; the myth that self-development is a process of change towards higher levels of existance; and the myth that adult learning is fundamentally (and necessarily) different from child learning."
>
> Mark Tennant (1986:121)

We decided that we would test out these assumptions or myths for ourselves. We would see if the theory could be grounded in practice. Although the initial question of "What do we want to learn?" was very hard to answer, we did not evade it and it became a continuing question to which the answer became clearer as we learnt together over the two years.

On reflection, it occurs to us that the assumptions Knowles (1978) made about adult learners have, for the most part, proved valid for us. Certainly we became increasingly self-directing as the course progressed but initially we needed a frame of reference from which we could develop. This frame of reference was provided minimally by the tutor at our request. Once we had a common language we could begin to share and make decisions about our learning in a way that had meaning for each of us.

Regarding our experience, both personal and professional, being a rich resource for learning (Knowles second assumption), this was certainly the case for us. Peter Jarvis (1987) has recently written of "Meaningful and Meaningless Experiences". His thesis is that the learning that results from, and the meaning that is attributed to, experience depends on the inter-relationship between a personal stock of knowledge and the socio-cultural-temporal milieu. The revised model of the learning process attempts to give reflection greater significance than in the learning cycle of David Kolb (1984). While the opportunity to reflect on our experience was an important element in the learning process it was not the preferred way of learning for all of us. The Jarvis (1987:166) model does not take account of the preferred learning style of each learner. We consider it important that account should be taken of different learning styles

in a group of adult learners and that teaching methods should be modified accordingly. One of us chose to research that particular area for her final study and the importance of recognising that individual learners have preferred ways of learning that may be different to other participants on the course cannot be ignored except to the detriment of all concerned. In Great Britain the Learning Style Questionnaire of Honey and Mumford (1982) (1986) has been useful in providing another method of discovering the preferred ways of learning of course participants.

Knowles' third assumption of adult learning is that readiness to learn is decreasingly the product of biological development and increasingly the product of the developmental tasks required for the performance of social roles. The fact that we were all women aged between 35 and 45 years of age was accidental but in the words of one of us,"....we sure as hell cashed in on it." We were all women from either the teaching or social work profession. Our initial motivations for undertaking the course were varied but centred around professional advancement, improving levels of education and learning for its own sake. The same test on motivation, designed by Christine Knott (1984), was completed again six months after the course finished. This time the results demonstrated a considerable shift in motivation towards such factors as social contact and social welfare (i.e.for the benefit of others, including students and colleagues) and a reinforcement of learning for its own sake and improving levels of education. In terms of Cyril Houle's (1961) typology we became less goal-orientated and more activity-orientated and remained orientated towards learning for its own sake. Life transitions were not immediately seen as part of our motivation to learn, as Carol Aslanian and Henry Brickell (1980) found. There is no doubt, however, that as we shared at an increasingly deep level as

the course developed that transitions in terms of personal relationships beginning, ending and continuing and being able to share these were part of the motivation to continue. Generally our needs personally as well as professionally contributed to us being hungry for learning. Our experience generally confirms that readiness to learn is associated with social roles in adult life. These social roles can, however, change quite radically over time. The decision to continue learning can be much more to do with whom you are learning and the learning process than with the fulfillment of original instrumental motives associated with social roles..

The final assumption is concerned with the problem-centred orientation to learning of adults with immediacy of application. Knowles assumes that adults come into an educational activity because of inadequacy in coping with current life problems. It is our contention that this is not always the case and that a more innovative future-centred orientation can apply. Problem-posing or as we preferred to say, issue-raising, is an important salient feature of the andragogic process. It is not, however, the only feature as we discuss below.

At the end of two years we have decided that we have something important to share. The question we put to ourselves as we met six months after the course finished was, "What do we have to tell?" which brings us to the next section.

THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

> "When we speak of feeling our personal power,we mean 'power with' not 'power over'....or we may choose to call it the energy of love....the kind of love that wants to work with the other to develop each other's potential"
>
> Carol and Dougald McLean (1987)

It is perhaps surprising that the above statement comes out of a lecture given in Australia not to to adult educators per se but to workers for peace. Nevertheless it does seem to capture the core of what we have to tell.

We have decided to include some personal statements of a qualitative nature and then to reflect on them and draw some final points.

- I felt the course to be 'life-enhancing' and 'life-empowering'.
- Basically it is about the excitement of potential, understanding and coming to terms with myself and others.
- I reached the heights and depths of my emotions on the course.
- The links between personal development, emotional responses and acquisition of new learning are now startlingly obvious.
- Experiencing the process of adult learning: the power and the excitement that you can be self-directing and responsible for your own learning.
- The course gave me tremendous insight into the power and support of a group such as ours

The above statements were extracted from the written responses to the question, 'What were the significant events and insights of the course?' They are deeply personal statements and they clearly reflect the importance of the affective as well as the cognitive domain in the learning process. As Carl Rogers (1983) states:

> "When a facilitator creates, even to a modest degree, a classroom climate characterized by all that she can acheive in realness, prizing and empathy;

> when she trusts the constructive tendency of the individual and the group; then she discovers that she has inaugurated an educational revolution..... Feelings - positive, negative, confused - become a part of the classroom experience."
>
> Carl Rogers (1983:128)

Unfortunately the affective domain is all too often ignored or denied in certificated courses where the emphasis is on the cognitive. It is our experience like many recorded in the above book that the two domains are linked and not separate.

Additionally we would like to record what we found were the crucial elements in the process of empowerment. We will also comment on aspects that may inhibit that process. This is our testimony to the paradoxical process.

Key Elements of Success

- a negotiated/partnership curriculum

According to Brian Groombridge's (1983) analysis what is learned in this mode is decided by negotiation between those who wish to learn and those responsible for teaching. It is common in this mode for university tutors to work out syllabuses with their students and for teachers and taught to learn from each other. More specifically, we found that the balance of power, in curriculum design terms, shifted radically during the course from being relatively tutor directed initially (at the request of the students) to being almost totally student directed at the end. This continuous process of making decisions is part of empowerment. Initially we resisted it although it was something we desired. We found the process hard and at times we were anxious and felt

vulnerable. Eventually we became confident, formidable even in knowing what we wanted to learn and how we wanted to learn it. We were eventually negotiating from a position of strength.

- recognition of the process of learning

Recognising what was occurring in the group in terms of relationships and group dynamics was an important complement to the items of content generated by negotiation. There was a shared responsibility for this process, enhanced by a weekend away together with the specific task of learning about ourselves as a group.

- the creation of a fruitful learning climate

Generally this was facilitated by the physical environment. The course took place in a bungalow in the beautiful grounds of the Institute. The lounge, with its comfortable chairs, was used as the main base but the kitchen saw plenty of activity and of special note were the shared meals we had together. It was also helpful that most of the tutors had their offices in the bungalow. The psychological climate was centred around the development of trust, respect, openness, commitment, valuing, caring and empathy.

- the appropriate use of experiential learning

A key feature was the experiential nature of some the learning and the opportunity to reflect on the experiences. In terms of our learning styles many of us preferred to move from the concrete to the abstract rather than vice

versa and so a more experiential approach suited us. Remembered happenings are sharing objects of significance to us in our adult lives, painting pictures of ourselves, sharing lifelines, silence at the start of some sessions and two residential weekends. A brief comment on being away together: all of us found that the opportunity afforded to learn in a concentrated, intensive way was extremely valuable. For part-time learners it is a chance to leave behind distractions and exclusively attend to our learning. We also laughed a lot.

- the mutual learning of the tutor and the student

The empowerment process involved the tutors in giving away their power and control and facilitating the students in the exercise of power and control of their own learning. It was empowering for the students to recognise the vulnerability and fallibility of the tutors and equally empowering for the tutors to be released from role-playing and to be fully human with the group. Generally the process involved us all in feeling vulnerable and open to pain of criticism as we learned to be less defended and more open. To admit vulnerability takes great strengh and courage which is paradoxical. It was also paradoxical that, at the point of self-direction and making choices, there was a growing realisation of not being self-sufficient; that recognising personal empowerment does not necessarily mean that independence is the way forward. Personal empowerment for us involved the interdependence of corporate consideration. It is possible to exercise personal ascendancy without violating others through the process of continuous dialogue in a climate of mutual trust and respect.

It would be good to say that in the end there was no difference between tutor and student in terms of decision-making and balance of power but that would be less than the truth as there were powerful forces working against the equalising process at certain points in the course and it is perhaps appropriate to discuss them briefly now.

Key Elements of Dissatisfaction

- assessment

It was at the point of assessment that the balance of power shifted most heavily in the tutors' favour because they had, with the external assessor, the power to pass or fail a student. It was also the point at which the tutors came up against the powerful bureaucratic institution of a university which laid down procedures for assessment which were much more concerned with the protection of the institution and less concerned with the development of students. Patient dialogue with the university has meant some progress has now been made in terms of being able openly to give continuous feedback on performance. It was invaluable to have an external assessor who basically supported the andragogic approach adopted.

Some difficulties remain to do with the centrality of experience in our learning process. We have found it liberating to examine our experience and to use it as the starting point for academic work. Generally the starting point in British academic work is theory and not experience. The work of Jane Thompson (1984) has been important in making this alternative way of proceeding more valid.

Nevertheless liberation requires discipline if it is to be productive and influential. Accordingly our experience requires rigorous critical analysis in the light of others' theory. Whether this paper contributes to that disciplined process is for others to decide.

- tutor performance

When tutors were not so closely in touch with the learning process there was a tendency for a more pedagogic approach to be used. While this might have been appropriate in terms of the relative newness of the information for the students it was received as not helpful to the learning process. When we are capable of making our own decisions then to be denied this is wasteful of resources. The tutor who retains power denies herself the opportunity of empowerment and in the processs certainly denies it to others.
It is perhaps hard for those used to wielding power in the classroom to relinquish it.

Other dissatisfactions were in the minor irritation category.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

We have attempted to analyse our educational experience and to reflect on it in the light of what others have hypothesised. We are clear that what we experienced is valuable and worth the time we spent together subsequently to record it.

The paradox of empowerment remains as a valid statement.

-To be empowered is to experience powerlessness and vulnerability, our own and each others.

-To be part of such a process takes strength.

-The empowering tutor is one who gives away power and facilitates others in the exercise of power.

-The empowered student is not self-sufficient and is corporately interdependent.

It occurs to us that if the process we have described has been empowering for us it could have significance for others too. We were a small group of people engaged in learning with and from each other for two years. We have recognised our similarities with people working for peace and with the liberation of women through education. On a national or international scale who has the courage and the strength to be willing to become powerless and vulnerable and so engage in the process of empowerment for all?

We remember each other and are thankful for the enlargement of our minds.

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